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ABSTRACT

This briefing paper discusses school counselors' roles and responsibilities; that is, how they currently spend their time. A comprehensive statewide system of school-to-work (STW) opportunities for students is being established in Arizona. One component of the evaluation involves a study of counselors and their attitudes toward STW as a concept and as a vehicle for education reform. The study is intended to be replicated annually, with the hypothesis that if STW has the impact intended, then time spent counseling on work/career issues should increase. This first study (N=374) of counselors' time use and attitudes will be used as the baseline. Findings regarding characteristics of counselors in the sample, descriptive statistics on the types of schools in the sample, and level of job satisfaction of current counselors are presented and discussed. Key findings regarding time use by task and by issue are presented and discussed. (EMK)

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Arizona Public School Counselors – How Do They Spend Their Time? Baseline Results.

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Arizona Public School Counselors—How Do They Spend Their Time? Baseline Results

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #4 *January 1997*

by
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In October 1995, Arizona received a School To Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education for the purpose of creating a comprehensive *statewide system* of school-to-work opportunities for Arizona students. Morrison Institute for Public Policy is coordinating a multi-faceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative on behalf of the Governor's Division of School To Work (GDSTW). One component of the evaluation involves a study of Arizona public school counselors, their roles and responsibilities, and their attitudes toward STW as a concept and a vehicle for education reform. In the fall of 1996,[1] a statewide counselor survey was conducted to establish baseline measures of counselors' time use and attitudes toward STW prior to its widespread implementation in Arizona schools.

This briefing paper discusses counselors' roles and responsibilities—that is, how they currently spend their time. The study will be replicated annually, with the hypothesis that if STW has the impact intended, then one should see marked increases in the time spent counseling students on work/career issues. A companion paper summarizes counselors' attitudes toward education and STW and compares counselors' attitudes to those of Arizona parents, businesses, and educators.[2]

An Overview of the Counselor Survey

In collaboration with the GDSTW and an independent polling firm—Wright Consulting Services—Morrison Institute designed the counselor survey with two purposes in mind. First, the survey sought to determine how much time counselors spend one-on-one counseling students and the nature of the counseling provided. Second, the survey was designed to measure counselors' attitudes toward STW—comparable to attitudes measured for other key constituent groups (i.e., parents, businesses, and educators) who were polled in spring 1996.

Due to the lack of a statewide directory or roster of public school counselors, the survey sample could not be selected from a "universe" of counselors. Instead, surveys were sent to every Arizona high school and junior high/middle school, a random sample of elementary schools, and a targeted sample of charter schools (i.e., those serving older populations of students). A total of 1000 surveys were mailed to the attention of the school's guidance counselor.

A total of 374 usable surveys were returned and analyzed relative to the distribution list. It was determined that responses are representative of counselors statewide. The sample includes responses from counselors in all 15 counties, working in schools with varying student enrollments, and in all types of settings (e.g., elementary, junior/ middle, high school). One-third of the respondents are men; two-thirds are women. Seventeen percent represent minorities with 11 percent Hispanic, three percent American Indian, two percent African American, and one percent Asian.

In sum, the sample size yields results that are statistically accurate with a 95 percent level of confidence and with a margin of error not exceeding ± 5.2 percentage points.

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Counselor Characteristics

Public school counselors responding to this survey are, for the most part, a highly professional group.

- 95% work full time
- 94% are college graduates
- 90% are experienced counselors, having practiced their profession for between one to over 20 years
- 78% are professionally certified as guidance counselors/have a counseling endorsement
- 53% are members of a professional guidance counseling association
- 50% have attended the Arizona Counselors' Academy at least once to upgrade their knowledge and skills
- 42% are members of a teacher/educator union

School Environments and Level of Job Satisfaction

Most respondents (40 percent) indicate working with students in grades 9-12. Of the remaining 60 percent, 32 percent work with students in grades 6-8, while 28 percent work with younger children in grades K-5.

Roughly 30 percent of the respondents work in schools with fewer than 600 students. Half work in schools with enrollments between 600 and 1500 students. The remainder work in large schools with enrollments exceeding 1500 students.

Among all respondents, 16 percent indicate being the only counselor for the district, irrespective of grade level or school size.

In terms of how counseling duties are organized or distributed, the most common organizational scheme is grade level—37 percent of the respondents indicate that school counseling is distributed by grade. Less than one-third of the respondents (30.4 percent) indicate that they provide counseling based on a specialty area such as career counseling. In fact, only three respondents (less than one percent of the sample) indicate specifically that they provide vocational/career counseling or competency-based career guidance.

Regarding caseloads, about one-third of the respondents (35.1 percent) are personally responsible for fewer than 300 students. Two-thirds are assigned counseling responsibilities for over 300 students.

In spite of relatively high caseloads, a majority of the public school counselors responding to the survey are either "very satisfied" (35 percent) or "somewhat satisfied" (48 percent) working in Arizona's public school system. However, job satisfaction varies depending upon the group with whom counselors interact. Table 1 shows Arizona counselors' satisfaction relative to working with different groups.

Table 1
Counselor satisfaction working with constituent groups (N=374)

Group	% very-somewhat satisfied	% very-somewhat dissatisfied
Teachers	73.2	10.6
Principals	71.6	12.7
Local businesses	65.4	15.6
Parents	60.5	22.7
District administrators	52.5	31.5

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100. Non-responses (missing data) are not reported.

How Do Counselors Spend Their Time?

Two questions sought to determine the nature of counselors' overall roles and counseling duties.

First, counselors were asked to indicate—for an "average" academic year—the percent of their overall duties allocated to five kinds of tasks:

- counseling students (e.g., one-on-one);
- responding to crises;
- planning or developing curriculum;
- providing "system support" such as preparing budgets, attending meetings, and so forth; and
- other "non-guidance" activities.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of time spent on various counseling and noncounseling activities. The figure illustrates that one-on-one student counseling **does** account for the single greatest allocation of time among counselors (37 percent). Cumulatively, however, more crisis-oriented student counseling and other noncounseling activities (e.g., attending meetings) account for 63 percent of Arizona counselors' time.

Second, *strictly in terms of counseling students*, counselors were asked to indicate the nature of the counseling provided in terms of the following issues:

- the student's behavior,
- higher education,
- work/career, and
- "other."

Figure 2 shows the distribution of time spent counseling students on specific issues. This figure indicates that most one-on-one counseling time (39 percent) is spent dealing with students' behavioral issues (e.g., misbehaving in class). Dealing with "other" issues (e.g., overall academic success and failure; class scheduling) accounts for an additional 26 percent of time spent individually with students. Only about one-third of student counseling (35 percent) relates to students' postsecondary plans, with 19 percent of the time devoted to higher education issues and 16 percent of the time allocated toward discussing work/career related issues.

Figure 1
Counselors' overall duties: Percentage of total time spent by task

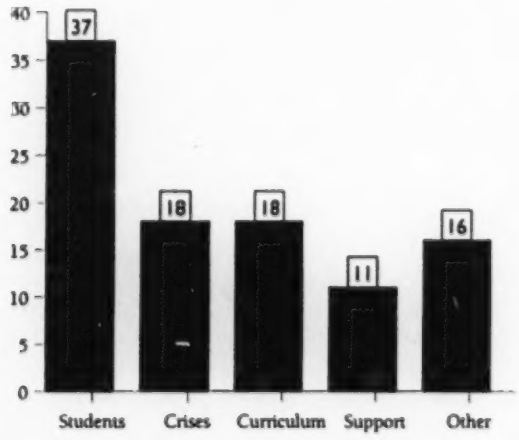
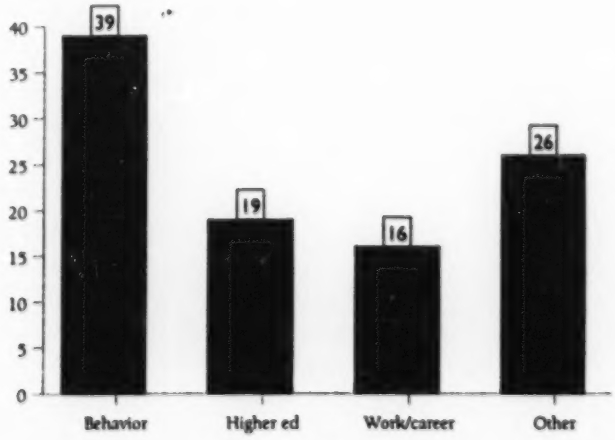


Figure 2
Student counseling: Percentage of time spent by issue



Discussion

This paper summarizes key findings from a baseline study of the roles and responsibilities of Arizona public school counselors. Results of the study indicate that Arizona's public school counselors are a highly professional group of educators who work primarily with students at designated grade levels. Most are responsible for over 300 students each. This is an important fact, given that research suggests that counseling is most effective when the counselor/student ratio does not exceed or is near 1:300.[3]

On the whole, counselors are satisfied working in Arizona's public schools. They are most satisfied working with teachers and principals; least satisfied working with district administrators and parents.

Counselors responding to this survey spend nearly two-thirds of their time (63 percent) responding to crises or on duties (e.g., administrative) other than one-on-one student counseling. Nevertheless, one-on-one counseling occupies an average of 37 percent of a counselor's time during an average academic year. Research suggests that a ratio of 75 percent counseling time to 25 percent noncounseling time is ideal to maximize the effectiveness of student counseling (see endnote #3).

When Arizona counselors *are* engaged with students one-on-one, a majority of counseling time is spent on non-academic matters. Only about one-third of student counseling time is dedicated to postsecondary planning. Examined in the broader context of a counselor's overall duties for an "average" year, counseling students on postsecondary plans accounts for only 12.9 percent of a typical Arizona public school counselor's job. Of this percentage, only 5.9 percent relates to work or career issues.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that counselor/student ratios in Arizona are relatively high. Conversely, time spent individually counseling students is relatively low. Moreover, time spent counseling students on postsecondary plans is even lower, with the proportion of time spent on work and career interests accounting for the least amount of student counseling time.

A working hypothesis in Arizona is that school counselors and career-oriented counseling are key elements necessary for the state's STW initiative to succeed. The results of this baseline study of counselors and how they spend their time suggests that the state has a major challenge ahead in positioning counselors and career counseling in the forefront of the STW movement.

Endnotes

1. A subsample of counselors were surveyed at the Arizona Counselors' Academy held in Tucson in June 1996.

2. See Vandegrift and Wright (January 1997). *Arizona Counselors' Perceptions of School To Work: Baseline Results.* [Arizona STW Briefing Paper #5.] Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University, Morrison Institute for Public Policy.

3. From *Children Achieving Potential* by Harriet L. Glosoff and Constance L. Koprowicz, a 1990 publication of the National Conference of State Legislatures and the American Association for Counseling and Development.

Arizona's SCHOOLTOWORK SYSTEM

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